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THEA 2110

Professor Richmond

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Critical Review of UGA’s Performance of Julia Cho’s “BFE”

I have attended many plays and musicals, as they are some of my favorite forms of entertainment, however I had never first read a play then watched it be performed.  This was a novelty for me and I found it quite interesting to compare how I imagined the piece in my head

versus how the actors and directors produced it on stage.  Unlike some of the other pieces we have read this year, this play was pretty straight-forward when it came to dialogue and imagining how the scenes would play out when reading it.  However, there were several scenes that I remember wondering how a director would produce such on stage. I understand that the theater department was not given a budget for this play, and I took that into consideration in my critique of setting and costumes.  Overall, I believe the play was intriguing and somewhat uncomfortable at times, which is to be expected when working with such dark subject matter.

The actors were perfectly chosen for the characters they portrayed.  Each actor looked exactly how Julia Cho described him or her in her character list at the beginning of the play, which is pretty impressive considering all the actors were pulled from a pool of college students with a very finite age range.  My favorite was The General/Jack, who I think many people enjoyed. He brought in a sense of humor I had not imagined when initially reading the play. The audience seemed to really enjoy his stage presence and he added that layer of comedy that was lacking when reading the play.  I also thought Evvie was incredible. She was bright and full of energy, just as how Julia Cho portrayed her in the play. She was the pop of optimism the play needed, and I think everyone really enjoyed her. I think Hae-yoon (a.k.a. Elizabeth) was perfectly cast. Her Asian accent was spot on, while still being familiar enough that we

understood everything she said.  Her emotion and happiness were contagious and you couldn’t help but smile during her little monologues to Panny.  It was not until I actually saw her and Panny on stage that it hit me how much happier Hae-yoon was than Panny even though Panny lived in America and Hae-yoon believed everything is sunny and great in America.  Lefty and Isabel were great and played their parts to a tee. You could see Lefty’s frustration and struggles with himself and later with Isabel. Isabel brought some comedy, even though her situation is pretty messed up.  Personally, Hugo did not seem quite as I had imagined him when initially reading the play. The scene that I had imagined completely different in my head was when Hugo and Panny finally meet. I imagined Hugo acting a little more pompous and hurtful than how he really came off on stage.  However, I can definitely see how this could be read and interpreted differently. Unfortunately, Hugo just did not stand out to me in the play. I just think some of the other characters overshadowed him a bit. When I read the play, I thought there should be some "it" factor that makes Hugo enticing to Panny, but in her scenes with him she just always seemed afraid or confused to talk to him.  I do admit that during the first few scenes where they play phone tag, he was pretty comical and that added some humor into the story.

While there were limited props and the setting was fairly bare, I thought this allowed us to really focus on the story, especially during Panny’s monologues. This play did not need much

extra to really get the message across.  Simple lighting and sound effects went along with the simple setting.  There were few instances where sound was used, including some of the television scenes, telephone scenes, and Lefty and Evvie's interaction at the mall (which was to simulate a crowded area).  As I stated before, I understand the cast had a limited budget for the play, but I thought it was creative how they organized the stage. When a stage is as bare as this one was, the audience really focuses on the actors and their portrayal of their characters.  I think this just showed how well the actors performed, and how well they created the scene without overwhelming the stage.

There were several instances where I was interested to see how the director would portray them on stage.  One of these was a scene closer to the end where Panny shows how The Man carved “UGLY” into her. The director opted to draw this word out on Panny’s stomach in a dark red marker (or makeup of some kind) which looked fairly realistic.  I am sure if this were a larger production with makeup artists, they would strive to make this scar look as realistic as possible. Another scene was the end where Panny is crying bloody tears. To portray this, the direct just used a band around Panny’s eyes and she pulled off the top layer to reveal a red (bloody) layer, which I thought was pretty clever.  I did not think it was possible to have her actually crying red tears so I think this was a creative way to go. I was also interested to see the scenes between Isabel and The General/Jack play out, especially since the actor playing The General/Jack has to switch between the two many times in a fairly short amount of time. The director was smart in placing the television set close to the edge of the curtain so this actor could quickly maneuver his costume between characters.  At first glance, one may not notice this, but I appreciate the thought the director and cast put in to produce these scenes so smoothly.

This play focuses on many touchy subjects and the director has to be smart in how far he or she decides to go in illustrating these subjects.  Rape, violence, and discrimination are three of the themes of this play and when the audience has to endure watching some of these scenes unfold, it can make them somewhat uncomfortable.  However, I think that was the goal of Julia Cho. These are topics that must be discussed if we ever want a change and want them to stop. They cannot be ignored. The production crew made sure to advise the audience that this play was for mature eyes only, though they also did a good job in censoring some of the more gory scenes, especially the final scene when Panny reveals the nasty scar The Man carved into her.  The director has the freedom to show as much or as little of these pivotal scenes as he or she chooses, though I think it was smart of the director to limit these events to Panny simply projecting a monologue. Another thing to put into consideration with these scenes

are not just the audience but the actual actors acting out these scenes.  The actors and actresses were no more than 20 or so years old and they may, themselves, feel very uncomfortable producing some of these scenes.  Overall, the director did a fine job in not crossing a line during his production of these uncomfortable scenes.

There were a few scenes that really stood out to me as just spectacular and really pulled the play together.  This play has many micro-stories within a larger story. Julia Cho switches her focus between each of the characters and their relationships with others.  We have scenes with Hugo and Panny, then Lefty and Evvie, and then Isabel and Jack. I really enjoyed the scenes with Isabel and Jack because they were much more humorous than I had imagined.  I also think the scene where Lefty and Evvie first meet is light and fun and brings a sense of bright happiness to the play for a short while. Lastly, I think Panny’s monologues were striking and really got the audience thinking about the issues brought up in the play.  These monologues are eerie and grab the audience’s attention so we focus completely on Panny. As I stated before, I think having a pretty bare stage allowed us to zoom into Panny and really listen to her. It seemed as though a spotlight was cast on her. I think it was clever of Cho to repeat parts of the monologue from the beginning at the end, as well.  Panny complains about the untrue rumors that circulated revolving what happened to her. It shows how society reacts when events like this happen in a community. Lots of the time, we lose sight of the truth.

In conclusion, I believe the cast did a great job in producing a simplistic, yet attention-grabbing performance.  All of the actors were cast perfectly and look exactly how one would imagine them to look, given Cho’s descriptions.  The simple set allowed the audience to really focus on the dialogue between characters and Panny’s monologues. Though there were some tough scenes to watch and the audience may have gotten uncomfortable at times, I believe the director did a great job in not crossing the line of complete discomfort, and kept the scenes fairly mild, allowing Panny to speak about her experience rather than show it to us first-hand.  The cast did a great job in transitioning between scenes, and between focus on certain characters and their relationships. I really enjoyed watching the play. There was no intermission which I think was smart because there does not seem to be any point in the play where there can be a break. The play builds up the whole time up until the ending scenes. The audience is practically begging to know what happened to Panny by the end of the play.  I applaud the UGA Performing Arts Department for their great rendition of Julia Cho’s “BFE”.